

CHAPTER 243

Round 3

"Wide open area? Shit."

Justin sighed with irritated disbelief as Teddie continued to herd him through the school. This time he had managed to find himself down in the music room, where assorted instruments decorated every corner. Justin was no fool; he could pick up on patterns easily, and so far all the fights had been in open areas such as this; the only question then was who was his supposed opponent? His eyes darted around the room in search of any other human life to little to no avail. Place seemed pretty barren; perhaps Justin had been first. Perhaps there was no fight after all. Justin scratched at his chin. Perhaps this was his lucky da-

Suddenly Justin's thoughts were interrupted by the alarming sensation of someone tapping him on the shoulder. Justin wasn't sure what provoked what happened next. Perhaps it was paranoia that everyone in this tournament was trying to kill Justin. Perhaps part of him just wanted to win the match before it started. Perhaps he was just startled and acted on instinct. Whatever it was, it provoked Justin to turn around and immediately deck Maya in the face. She was not amused, nor was Justin who immediately bit his fingernails in shame, pain shooting through his body as he watched Maya struggle with the pain. "Oh Jesus, I'm so sorry, I didn't mean too-"

"Why would you do that!?" Maya signed off, blood flowing from her nostrils and tears from her eyes. It was clear Justin had hit her pretty hard, much to his shame, though the tears looked like they had been coming down for a while and Justin had just made them worse. "Why does everyone hate me today...?" She sniffled as she tried to clot the blood in her nose. First Chie, then Yosuke, now Justin? She couldn't take this anymore. She had done nothing to deserve this treatment. It only took a moment before tears became all out hysterics. It wasn't the pain, it was that all her friends wanted to see her hurt that made her want to drown in a river of her own tears.

"H-hey, hey. Please don't cry, it was an accident." Justin tried to apologize, to not much success. Personally, he blamed whatever it was that Teddie had done to manipulate his words. In truth, Teddie hadn't quite activated it yet, perhaps finding amusement in Justin's outlash and Maya's tears. Justin extended his arms to give her a hug, one she would gladly accept after the day she had been having. Justin's clothes were surprisingly tear absorbent as it would seem.

"Y-Yosuke and Chie said I was fat. And then they got angry and tried to hit me, and, and..." Maya couldn't finish that thought before tears began to flow down her cheeks again. Justin patted at her back with sympathy for the girl as she broke

down. He could only imagine the damage comments like that could do to a previous anorexic.

"Shh, shh, it's alright. Don't worry, none of them-" Before Justin could finish, the crackle of speakers deafened Justin and Maya. Neither Rise nor Teddie seemed to speak though... They must have pressed the intercom button by accident. Justin just sighed before putting his hands on Maya's shoulders. "As I was saying, none of them were saying that stuff. Teddie's been manipulating them."

Maya backed away from Justin with an expression of pure shame and sadness on her face. *"I-I'm not ugly! I'm not!"* Justin stared at her with confusion for a moment. He couldn't even guess what had suddenly provoked her to start shouting about her appearances. He was going to guess whatever it was Teddie was doing had taken effect, but... Even when Teddie normally did this, usually the other person didn't seem like a ranting lunatic; just kind of an asshole. Maya? It sounded like she was having a different conversation. That was what confused him; they never really noticed that until after everyone had beat the shit out of each other. Justin extended his hand in an apologetic manner, perhaps feeling that whatever he was saying was in fact being twisted into something horribly disgusting.

"You look fine Maya." He tried to reassure her, though his pleas ultimately fell on deaf ears. Or perhaps, they fell on more than listening ears, though they had gone through some filter somewhere along the way. Tears started to flow down her skin again as she pushed Justin away, a combination of disappointment and sorrow clogging her throat as insult after insult barraged her ears. Why? WHY WAS EVERYONE DOING THIS TO HER!?

"Sh-Shut up! I-I... I'm pretty. Yosuke said..." She froze for a moment. Yeah he used to say it, but just a moment ago he had nothing but disgusting words to describe her appearance. Her lip quivered a bit; even the man she loved thought she was some ugly swine. She couldn't deal with it. Yet even despite the clear emotional turmoil she was under, Justin hadn't expected her to revert back to her old ways so quickly. She pushed Justin away before rushing off, tears in her eyes as she rushed out the door. Strange; weren't there usually invisible walls there? It didn't matter; Justin ran after her to make sure she was alright. What he found instead was Maya trying to stick her finger down her throat again. He was quick to tackle her before she started to vomit, though he was a little late and ended up getting puke on his shoulder as he brought her to the ground.

"What in god's name are you doing!?" Justin scolded her with annoyance. Years it had been since she forced herself to puke up her stomach contents to lose weight. What had gotten into her that within a few hours time she had already reverted back to that state of mind? Perhaps he didn't realize that when someone you cared deeply about insulted you, well, you took it really deep to heart. Tears were still flowing down her face as she struggled to try and get free from Justin's grip.

"Why are you doing this!? I'm just trying to give you what you want." She sniveled. If everyone thought she was so hideous, then maybe she needed to fix that. Justin stared at her with bafflement before something suddenly dawned on him. Maya wasn't hearing a damn thing he was saying, but he could understand everything she was saying. And why was that? Because whatever Teddie was doing was altering sound, not visuals. And Maya wasn't exactly the most vocal person in the world. Justin only felt bad that everyone else could see her like this too; especially Yosuke. He probably feels like the biggest douchebag in the world right now, and it wasn't even his fault. Justin grabbed Maya by the cheeks, keeping her head steady as he raised his finger, trying to get her to stop crying for a second.

"Maya, do me a favor. How much wood could a wood chuck chuck if a wood chuck could chuck wood?" Justin signed off to the best of his ability. He had to pick something so bizarre that there was no way she would just say something that happened to correspond with his sign-language. Given the really confused look on her face, Justin was going to guess she understood him perfectly clear.

"Wha... What does that have to do with anything!?"

"Just answer it."

"A fucking lot, I don't know!" She countered with aggravation. Justin sighed as he pushed himself off of Maya and tried to wipe some of the barf on his shoulder off his clothes. God knows he didn't want any of that shit after all, so the quicker he got that shit off the better. The good news was that he had found a way around Teddie's little censor, and as far as he could tell from Teddie and Rise's silence, this wasn't one of his matches. It worked great, because the power of two was much better than the power of one after all. Justin smiled as he extended his hand to help Maya up to her feet. She accepted begrudgingly, a perplexed expression on her face. Here Justin was calling her a fatass just a moment earlier, and now he was smiling and helping her up to her feet like a gentleman. She didn't get it at all.

"Maya, you are a blessing in disguise, you know that?" Justin signed off with gratitude for the girl. She may not have known it, but just by being her, she had managed to solve one of the biggest problems plaguing this damn tournament of theirs. After all, everyone in the group knew a LITTLE sign language so they could communicate with Maya when Justin and Yosuke weren't around. It wasn't much, but it was something, and that something would have to do. *"Listen to me, everything you've been hearing? No one has said any of that. Teddie's been messing with our words; but I don't think he can do anything with our sign-language."*

"I... Don't follow." Maya shook her head with puzzlement. The sudden mood shift, the bullshit that seemed to be dripping from Justin's mouth right now. It was all much too confusing for her; she couldn't say she necessarily wanted to know either.

For all she knew this was just another insult about her weight in disguise. It wouldn't surprise her at this point, but it would hurt all the same.

"You've been hearing things, essentially. We all have, but you... You can communicate just fine with us because of... uh... your condition." Justin tried to put it delicately, knowing Maya didn't like having attention drawn to her lack of voice. Her eyes fell to the ground, her mind deep in thought on the matter. It was a pretty damn shitty thing to feel proud of, but if what Justin was saying was true, and not just him trying to lure her in a false sense of security, then perhaps she did feel just a tad bit special. But then, she wasn't sure how much good she could do when no one seemed to stop yelling at her.

"So... Yosuke really doesn't think I'm fat?" Maya questioned with wide eyes. Man, she was really focused on that, wasn't she. Justin smiled at her, wrapping his arm around her shoulders in a reassuring fashion. He didn't necessarily like Yosuke, and he didn't necessarily think Yosuke had the purest intentions dating his sister, even after a year had passed, but he was still a good guy, and he was sure Maya and him would be just fine.

"Of course not. You know that's not true." Maya smiled a bit, cheering up at the mere confirmation that there was a possibility Yosuke really did think she was beautiful. She sniveled a bit, running her finger beneath her nose as she smeared the blood still dripping from her nostrils. Justin probably broke her nose, and she was still pretty pissed about that, but given the circumstances, she was going to let it slide. For now anyway. Besides, they had bigger fish to fry; and I don't necessarily mean Teddie either. The two stared at each other with relief for a moment when the smile slowly started to fade from her face, an expression of horror taking its place, wide eyes and mouth agape. Justin's smile faded to an expression of confusion as Maya looked like she had just been kicked in the ovary or something. *"What's wrong?"*

"Justin, run." Justin was needless to say pretty damn confused, though once he actually did get a glimpse as to what was behind him, he could honestly say his face shifted just the same. Though whether that was from the shock or having his head slammed into the wall beside him he couldn't tell. Blood dripped from the corners of his mouth as he twitched in pain, groaning as he tried to get up, only to be forced back down with a kick to the rib cages. He rolled over in pain, eyes wide and bloodshot as he stared up at the ceiling. Out of the corner of his eyes to the right was Maya, very visibly frightened and backing away slightly. And to his left?

A splitting image of himself, pure white eyes and fury in his veins. Yeah, Justin was just as surprised himself. He thought they had settled all of this; he thought they had made a deal. Justin's shadow, however was livid, yanking Justin up by the collar of his shirt and shoving him into the way, bloody murder in his eyes as he stared at

his human counterpart. **“You motherfucker. Do you realize what you’ve done!?”**

“Let go of me, we had a deal!” Justin countered, squirming as he tried to get loose of his shadow’s grip. The shadow wasn’t budging though, and in fact had tossed Justin across the room with a single sweep of his arm. Absorbing the powers of a dead god had made him extraordinarily strong, and he intended to use every ounce of that power to his advantage and grant himself the revenge he so desired. Justin shouted in pain as every bone in his body screamed out in agony upon collision with the wall on the opposite side of the hall, cracks in its brick structure.

“Deal!? Look around you! The deal was that you would keep your filthy human paws off my world, and look at it now! No, I’m afraid the deal has long since been broken. You humans can’t be trusted.” The shadow angrily ranted and raved as he made his way to where Justin now lay. Justin was quick to roll over on his back and try to kick the shadow in his crotch as he approached, though that did nothing more than make him flinch for a moment. A shame, dick kicking had been working so good until now. It would seem that in the end all Justin had done was make his shadow angrier. Angry enough to pull out a switchblade and try to press it against Justin’s throat. He tried to fight the shadow off, though he was having very little success keeping him at bay as the knife drew closer and closer to his neck.

“We had nothing to do with this! We’re trying to figure out what’s going on, too!” Justin tried to explain, hoping that the circumstances being beyond his control would be enough of a deterrent to keep the shadow at bay. In the end though, it seemed the shadow had already convinced himself that all humans were filthy liars. This was a product of their engineering; they had fucked his world up the ass again, and he wouldn’t stand for it. The knife touched the skin of Justin’s throat, where the tip of the blade dug into the flesh ever so slightly. Not enough for bleeding, but enough that with one push, Justin would be dead in a heartbeat.

“Oh it’s too late for shifting blame. You’re human, it’s in your very blood. The only cure would be a complete blood transfusion...” The shadow chuckled a bit with sinister glee. **“So why don’t we get started?”** He smirked as he tried to apply force to the hand that held his switchblade, intent to slit Justin’s throat and let him bleed out all over the floor. That had been the intent anyway. What he hadn’t intended was to be ambushed by Maya, who kicked him straight in the face. He dropped his weapon as he stumbled backwards, caught off guard by a factor he had forgotten to take into account; the girl had been with him. Given the way her chest seemed to inflate in and out, she was clearly very afraid of the shadow. And why shouldn’t she be? He was a god now, especially to these puny humans. Let no one stand between him and his goals. Her eyes were wide as she breathe in and out in heavy breaths, pupils slowly making their way down to Justin as she struck a defensive position.

"Justin, run!"

"What? Are you crazy, I'm not-"

"JUST GO!" She countered authoritatively. She knew Justin didn't want to leave her alone with a mad man, but she'd be alright. At least, she thought she would be. All the same, she couldn't let Justin fight this battle. He didn't have the energy in him, especially with his injuries. He wouldn't last even a second in the fray; so she would have to be his stand-in. But it was important that he got away before his shadow forgot about Maya and turned his attention back to his counterpart. Justin stared at her with slight horror as she stood over him, ready to defend him even from death. It was touching, but oh so concerning. This wasn't just a kind gesture. There was a pretty good chance this could be fatal, especially now that his shadow had absorbed Izanami's powers...

Perhaps it was for that reason Justin had never felt more ashamed in his life as he crawled away, leaving Maya and Justin's shadow to duke it out. He didn't even look behind him as he ran away... He didn't want to see the bloodshed.